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AUTHOR	Payer, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

This paper builds upon the accomplishments of the Work Group on Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) Collaboration, established during the summer of 1988, which was charged with proposing strategies for strengthening the educational research, development, and dissemination system by increasing cooperation and collaboration among the major institutional projects funded by OERI. A review of the history of coordination and collaboration of research, development, and dissemination activities as a public policy concern is followed by a discussion of the rationale for institutional collaboration. General issues surrounding the concept of collaboration (including goals, organizational issues, procedures, and resources) are outlined, and policy questions associated with these issues are posed. An examination follows of how and under what circumstances OERI units and OERI-funded institutional projects might collaborate. The paper concludes with five general recommendations designed to stimulate further discussion on the specifics of future OERI collaboration endeavors. (16 references) (GL)

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BACKGROUND PAPER

Reflections on Collaboration in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Elizabeth Payer
Information Services
May 1, 1989

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Introduction

This paper is a background document designed to provide a framework within which further discussion about collaboration can occur. It is neither a blueprint that prescribes the kinds of collaboration that ought to be undertaken nor a policy pronouncement that provides overarching principles to guide participation in collaborative activities. Rather, it is a discussion piece designed to extend the debate about how and under what circumstances the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) can foster collaboration. This paper is one of a series of steps in the continuing dialog between and among OERI and its institutional projects; and, it builds upon the accomplishments of the Work Group on OERI Collaboration which was established during the summer of 1988. The challenge to this Group was to propose strategies for strengthening the educational research, development, and dissemination (RD&D) system by increasing cooperation and collaboration among the major institutional projects funded by OERI.

The Group consisted of representatives of the five major OERI organizational units -- Office of Research, Programs for the Improvement of Practice, Library Programs, Information Services, and the National Center for Education Statistics. In addition, it drew heavily from representatives of the OERI institutional projects -- including the Regional Educational Laboratories, National Research and Development Centers, ERIC Clearinghouses, National Diffusion Network program, and Leadership in Educational Administration Development program.

In September 1988, the Work Group issued a summary of its deliberations. The "Report of the Working Meeting on OERI Collaboration" made a number of specific recommendations about how OERI programs could help each other and work together. (See the Appendix, in particular pages 4-10.)

Through this paper, I would like to: (1) continue the momentum begun by the OERI Work Group; (2) review the history of coordination and collaboration of RD&D activities as a public policy concern; (3) outline a number of general issues surrounding the concept of collaboration and pose policy questions associated with these issues; (4) examine how and under what circumstances OERI units and OERI-funded institutional projects might collaborate; and (5) make several recommendations about where to go from here -- how to translate rhetoric into action.

Background

The recently released Preliminary Staff Report on Educational Research, Development and Dissemination prepared for the Subcommittee on Select Education summarized testimony received during the spring 1988 oversight hearings on the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. In the introductory

section of the Staff Report, OERI was reminded of its mission and of the need to reclaim a vision for federal involvement in education.

> The goal of federal research, development and dissemination efforts should be the establishment of a national treasure chest of research results, models, and materials to be conveniently placed at the disposal of the nation's educational decision makers.

The Preliminary Staff Report went on to make a series of recommendations, including one calling for development of a national dissemination policy to provide an infrastructure for this "treasure chest." The Report then noted that OERI "should provide leadership by supporting a system for educators to exchange information on the effectiveness of programs, products and practices."

Using the 1978 Education Dissemination Forum as a bench mark, it would seem that for the past decade, especially, there has been a growing concern about how the federal sector of the education RD&D system can better respond to the needs of its users -- in particular, to those in the trenches -- practitioners, policy makers, and administrators. A particularly compelling issue has been how to translate the vast research base concerning education into practical applications that are not only reliable, but also accessible and understandable to those who must ultimately use them. In his "Brief History of Federal Dissemination Activities," Larry Hutchins traces the evolution of federal support for educational RD&D programs -- beginning with passage of the Cooperative Research Act (1954), through the creation of the National Institute of Education (1972) as a means to better coordinate research and development, and culminating with the creation of OERI (1979). The mission of OERI, as outlined by its authorizing legislation, Section 405 of the General Education Provisions Act, is the continued pursuit of "knowledge about education through research, improvement activities, data collection and information dissemination." Throughout this history it is clear that federal policy makers and legislators have wrestled with how best to array RD&D in order to affect the improvement of the schooling process. The establishment of OERI, the one entirely "new" agency that appeared when the Department of Education was created, was part of a strategy to tie together more effectively the processes of research and improvement. Now, again, as reauthorization approaches, there is a critical need to examine the effectiveness with which OERI carries out its mission.

One approach to examining the issue of effectiveness is through an increased emphasis on collaboration -- to be defined in this

paper as a planned/coordinated use of appropriate resources around the resolution of a common problem. The ultimate intent, of course, is to have a collective impact on the process of school improvement. The assumption is that in many instances collaborative efforts will have a more effective impact.

Rationale

The arguments for collaboration are rather straightforward and a matter of common sense. Organizations generally collaborate because: (1) they do not have the resources to "go it alone," (2) they are attempting to eliminate duplication of effort, and/or (3) they can accomplish more by having a "collective" impact. In the case of OERI units and their institutional projects, the benefits of collaboration are clear: awareness, assistance, and exchange of information, all of which are essential to come together in the resolution of common problems.

Collaboration should foster a heightened awareness among the range of OERI-funded RD&D activities about each other's work. This heightened awareness should then serve to nourish and improve the knowledge base to the benefit of its users. Awareness should also promote opportunities for communication that are extremely important. Research has shown that high levels of lateral communication, especially at low levels of the organization, are characteristic of an organization that performs well (Toward Effective Coordination, Appendix A - Wirt, 1985).

Heightened awareness should also serve to limit duplication of effort among programs and thus contribute to an overall more efficient RD&D program. Scarcity of resources, of course, should be an added incentive to collaborate because generally there has been much less to go around. As noted in the 1987 GAO report, Education Information, there have been long term declines in the funding of educational R&D. Since the 1970's there has been a 70 per cent reduction -- measured in constant dollars -- in the amount of funds made available to OERI and its predecessors for educational research. More effective use of the tax dollar has become paramount.

Collaboration should make it possible for one program or project to come to the aid of another. Since there are a range of capabilities and lines of inquiry throughout OERI, one area ought to be able to rely upon assistance from another.

Finally, from a more pragmatic, less idealistic standpoint it is essential that OERI begin to address the criticism of its RD&D system that has been rising to the surface during the the past several years. This criticism -- some of it well-considered, some of it very harsh, but all of it illuminating -- has emanated from a number of sources. These sources have included a range of commentaries -- from internal working documents (for instance,

the 1985 "Report of the OERI Task Force on Coordination Mechanisms") to occasional papers presented at the most recent AERA sessions (examples of how ERIC can better serve the consumer) to studies of OERI programs (such as the 1987 report of the Laboratory Review Panel on the review of the Regional Educational Labs). And, of course, there was the extensive testimony provided during the April 1988 oversight hearings on OERI before the House Subcommittee on Select Education.

Assumptions

In the following discussion of collaboration, a number of assumptions will be embraced:

(1) Collaboration ought to be encouraged, where appropriate, in order to ensure the most efficient use of the limited resources available for educational RD&D.

(2) OERI program units and their institutional projects are interested in and willing to support collaborative efforts where leadership is strong and mutual advantages/benefits can be demonstrated. However, collaboration is to some degree an unnatural and extremely complicated process. It requires powerful incentives.

(3) Collaboration ought to be embedded in OERI policies and procedures and in other official statements so that it will have official support and encouragement and thus become part of the OERI culture.

(4) Collaboration ought to be undertaken or engaged in around issues where there is a clearly defined need.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that <u>there are models of collaborative activities and initiatives currently underway</u> throughout OERI and its institutional projects. Future efforts to collaborate might seize upon the best of these as prototypes for further testing and refinement.

The Concept of Collaboration: Some General Issues

In testimony prepared for the Subcommittee on Select Education, House of Representatives, during oversight hearings on OERI, the Chairperson of the Council of ERIC Directors (COED) testified as follows --

> To move from the conceptual framework of interdependence to an operational reality requires a structure that will facilitate coordination, communication, and ultimately cooperation. And, cooperation cannot take place in any meaningful way unless and until there is understanding at the operational level of what it is that any given organization or group is attempting to do.

In some ways this testimony reflects the original intent of P.L. 96-88, the legislation which created the Department and OERI in 1979. The Congress saw a need for a "structure" to "facilitate coordination, communication, and ultimately cooperation" by tying more closely together the administration of a range of functions -- research, development, dissemination, assessment, and improvement activities -- dispersed throughout the Department.

The 1985 reorganization of OERI attempted to further strengthen coordination activities so that OERI could be "more productive and more responsive to the needs of those who use its information and services." This reorganization sought not only to remove superfluous bureaucratic layers but also to to use resources more effectively by organizing program activities around "like" functions, i.e., cohesive and unique groupings of activities that would address research, development/application, and dissemination. Thus, much of the research activity that is supported by OERI falls within the purview of the 22 national research centers (OR) that focus their activities on educational policy and practice topics of national significance. More targeted applied research, development, and technical assistance is carried out by the nine regional laboratories and other activities administered by Programs for the Improvement of Practice (PIP). Dissemination is undertaken and coordinated by Information Services (IS), primarily through the Educational Resources Information Center clearinghouses as well as through telecommunication activities, a publication program and an information office. While each of these functions (research, development/application, technical assistance, and dissemination) is concentrated within a major program area, it also exists in some shape or form throughout the other units. The Report of the Working Meeting on OERI Collaboration highlighted the fact that each of their areas to some extent engaged in all of the following:

Knowledge Generation -- Including the process of linking with practitioners to discover what knowledge is needed and what knowledge is "working."

Gap Analysis/Needs Assessment -- Including question asking of various constituents to discover gaps between needs and resources.

Knowledge Use -- Including such processes as knowledge synthesis, technical assistance, dissemination, etc.

Evaluation -- Both formative and summative, for purposes of planning and decision-making.

As stressed in the Group's report: "...all of the four major OERI-supported programs engage in common processes that could form the basis for productive collaborative activities.

In each organizational unit, these common processes result in a body of information/knowledge that relates to but, more importantly, has the potential to illuminate or otherwise amplify a similar body of information/knowledge being assembled in an OERI counterpart. The conundrum -- better phrased as a challenge -- is how can OERI better articulate this wealth of information for which it is wholly or partly responsible so that it can serve as the basis for collaborative efforts among OERI and its institutional projects?

The solution to this challenge is multi-faceted and complex -- it resides partially in the creation of an organizational environment that is amenable to collaboration and partially in a capability to assemble, sort, and disseminate a vast information/knowledge base so that when it is needed it is accessible and useful.

The sections that follow will attempt to flesh out and to make more concrete "what it is" that OERI is attempting to do as it begins to define its policy on collaboration. The "what it is" will be developed in a series of topics prompted by questions that have been raised over and over again in recent discussions, reports, and other commentary about the OERI RD&D system. Suffice it to say, these questions have implications for any policy that OERI develops. A partial list of these general questions -- relating to goals, organizational issues, procedures and resources -- follows:

Goals

What are the OERI goals that ought to be accomplished through institutional collaboration? How will these goals relate to furthering the OERI mission, particularly as this mission emphasizes the linking of research and practice to school improvement?

What will be the role of OERI -- of its Assistant Secretary, its program directors, its project monitors, and its institutional projects -- in responding to these goals? Given the breadth of the OERI RD&D system, what are the appropriate roles for each of these actors?

How will we know that collaboration has worked?

Organizational Issues

Whom are we asking to collaborate? What range of institutional actors are we involving?

Does the organization of OERI -- as it is currently configured -- hinder or facilitate collaboration? Since fragmentation of the educational RD&D system has been

identified as a serious problem, would it be appropriate to tie together more closely regional laboratories, centers, and ERIC clearinghouses within one administrative unit in OERI?

Is there an optimal organizational arrangement? Is it loosely coupled to encourage the natural evolution of collaboration or more centralized and dependent upon defined procedures?

Does OERI have the capacity/resources to undertake a lead role in new initiatives that depend on increased institutional collaboration?

Note: Over time, the amount of discretionary funds available for RD&D related activities (special studies, networks, needs assessments, etc.) have substantially diminished as a proportion of the total RD&D budget. (In 1972 roughly 30 per cent of RD&D funds was spent on institutional projects -- laboratories, centers, and clearinghouses. In 1988, more than 90 percent was spent to maintain these same types of institutions. As a function of this change, OERI's role to independently support RD&D activities has also been concomitantly reduced. What was once a part of the federal agency's "balanced portfolio" of activities has now fallen to the institutional projects as prime areas of responsibility. Because of this change in focus, can OERI exert the influence or negotiate the necessary deals in order to bring together the institutional projects around common issues?

Procedural Issues

How can OERI create an atmosphere that is conducive to collaboration? How can OERI encourage potential participants to engage in collaboration?

What are the pros and cons of voluntary vis-a-vis directed collaboration? What are the opportunities for experimentation? What are the incentives? the rewards? What are the barriers and how will they be overcome?

What mechanisms, such as specifications developed for grant applications, RFPs, and program regulations, can be used to strengthen collaboration among OERI and its institutional projects? How can internal accountability mechanisms such as performance agreements and position descriptions be used?

What criteria will be established to identify opportunities for collaboration? Which activities, themes, processes are compelling? How will priorities be established?

Is there a need for long-range planning -- at first involving OERI and its institutional projects, later other parts of the

Department and other Federal agencies -- that deals with collaboration?

When and under what circumstances is collaboration clearly inappropriate?

Should dissemination be used as starting place to launch collaborative efforts -- as suggested by some in testimony delivered to the Select Committee?

Resources

What resources will be used to support collaboration? Will there be set asides within the institutional awards, or separate discretionary incentive grants?

In order to provide a framework for the sections that follow, I have grouped the essence of these questions around what I judge to be five "core" themes that will require deliberation and resolution by OERI collaboration participants. At a minimum, these are the fundamental issues that OERI must tackle in any collaboration policy that it develops.

Setting and Acknowledging Goals

What ought to be the goals of collaboration? When we say that OERI programs and institutional projects ought to collaborate, what do we mean? When we set in motion an OERI collaboration initiative, what is our ultimate intent. These are important questions. And, while the business of setting goals can be viewed as a just one more hackneyed expression of bureaucratic reality, OERI will need to take this goal setting seriously. The goals established for increasing collaboration among OERI units will be goals that affect the entire organization, particularly its institutional projects. Reaching these goals will require a collective commitment to give greater meaning to the OERI mission.

As emphasized earlier, the ultimate intent of collaboration must be a series of outcomes that result in school improvement. A clear statement of these goals will then assist OERI to identify those collaboration ventures that have the most potential and ought to be pursued, those that ought to be discounted as inappropriate or unrealistic, and those deferred to a more opportune time.

It is also necessary to stress that collaboration is not an end in itself, but the means to an end. It is useful only insofar as it helps to fulfill the mission of OERI and has an impact in the classroom.

Understanding Roles

For any initiative to work successfully, it is essential that all participants have a clear understanding of how they will act in relation to one another and what is expected of them. This rule will also hold for collaboration to succeed as an OERI initiative. All the relevant OERI participants -- principals being the OERI Assistant Secretary, program directors, institutional projects, and project liaisons/monitors -- will need to understand their roles.

At least initially, potential collaboration participants should be defined to be the five OERI organizational units (OR, PIP, LP, IS, and NCES) and their institutional projects. Using this base, collaboration participants would involve the research and development centers, regional laboratories, Educational Resources Information Center clearinghouses, National Diffusion Network State Facilitators, Leadership in Educational Administration Program Centers, and possibly in the future other national, state or regional institutions and organizations. Currently, the institutional projects listed above represent 158 distinct organizations whose Fiscal Year 1989 budget totals in excess of $55 million.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary will play a key role in any OERI collaboration initiative. Under the auspices of this office, OERI should encourage and facilitate nationwide connections among the OERI programs and institutional projects. Any policy concerning collaboration will require the endorsement and the "active" support of the Assistant Secretary. To the extent that this individual is interested in and committed to encouraging collaboration, the initiative will have a better chance of succeeding. Having the power to set organizational priorities, approve program plans, and control discretionary resources, the Assistant Secretary can, in a very pragmatic sense, foster or hinder attempts to collaborate. Further, this individual might enunciate two or three (or more) problem/priority areas around which all potential collaboration participants might work in concert.

In addition, other OERI players will be instrumental -- program directors to see that planning takes collaborative activities into account and institutional liaisons to take a greater hand in generating collaborative efforts as part of their monitoring responsibilities. Finally, the role of the institutional projects will be defined and shaped by: 1) the goals of the collaboration program, 2) the specific activities to be undertaken, and 3) the funding mechanisms and time lines that will govern these activities.

It is clear from recent commentary about the educational RD&D system that leadership encouraging collaboration is conspicuously absent.

Creating a Climate That Is Conducive

From the standpoint of OERI, it will not be enough to say simply to its program units and to its institutional projects: "You shall collaborate." Indeed, if there is anything that we have learned about institutional change and improvement in educational settings during the past twenty years, it is that those who are being asked to pursue a course of action must be involved and committed if this course of action is to succeed. It would appear that this same line of reasoning would apply to the issue of collaboration.

Participants need to understand how they will benefit, especially because they might resist collaboration for reasons that are compelling -- a shortage of resources, a lack of readiness, or an absence of leadership or program stability. Also, they might resist for self-serving reasons -- bureaucratic rigidity, competition, a desire for autonomy, or a reluctance to give up control of projects and the visibility and the recognition that these projects and activities bring. These are realities that cannot be dismissed and must be overcome if collaborative activities are to be undertaken successfully. In many instances, collaborative relationships are fragile and require delicate negotiation.

The value of collaboration seems to be more compelling when it is viewed against the enormous potential that exists. For example, the 1987 Laboratory Review Panel report noted "an apparent lack of concerted effort by either OERI or the institutions to develop a general plan for fostering collaboration with other R&D resources funded by the Department of Education." The panel identified numerous assistance activities (193 operations from ERIC clearinghouses to Chapter I technical assistance centers, to desegregation assistance centers) funded by the Department that address issues around which the labs could collaborate. A recent review (Klein, AERA, 1989) of more than 100 education related clearinghouses indicated that many clustered around similar content areas: for instance, 19 focused specifically on special education or rehabilitation information, 8 on international information including education and training, 4 on evaluation, testing and assessment, and 14 on issues of limited English proficiency or literacy.

OERI need not embrace a collaborative approach in all instances, for indeed there are cases where redundant or duplicative efforts are necessary (Leib-Brilhart, AERA, 1989). Rather, OERI ought to consider collaboration or simply more deliberate coordination of specific activities that, orchestrated together, can be more effective in addressing school improvement issues.

Given this tradition of operating more or less alone, a system is needed for offering incentives and rewards, i.e., for recognizing

collaborative efforts that contribute to the mission of OERI. Contributions to the work of the organization must be recognized and -- in the case of collaborative accomplishments -- must not be limited to individuals. Prompt recognition and rewards should be given to all members of the collaboration team and should be tied to behavior that has produced innovative thinking, experimentation, and sustained commitment to OERI's mission. Also, OERI might explore the opportunities for incorporating requirements about collaboration in the annual performance agreements of its senior managers and institutional monitors if collaboration is to become an integral part of the OERI culture.

Identifying an Approach

An OERI policy on collaboration ought to consider how collaboration participants might approach the process of working together. While there are any number of models that describe how joint activities might be undertaken, there are at least three approaches -- not mutually exclusive -- that seem to make sense:

- collaboration around a function or a common process, i.e. knowledge generation, needs assessment, technical assistance, knowledge use, dissemination, etc.

- collaboration around an education theme such as "children at risk," "restructuring," "higher order thinking skills," "parental involvement," "literacy," "leadership," etc.

- collaboration around specific activities such as development of databases and maintenance of bulletin boards and other telecommunication links; production and review of a range of publications, including newsletters, digests, research reports and syntheses, directories, guides, and other products; consultation through participation on advisory boards; conduct of demonstrations, meetings and seminars; joint planning for future research, development, assessment, and dissemination initiatives. (This is not an exhaustive list of activities. See the Appendix for additional examples.)

At this point, it bears repeating that "information/knowledge" will be the linchpin for coming together in any of these approaches. As noted in the COED testimony, the problem is that all of the information providers and producers "...operate more or less independently. Consequently, information does not systematically flow from information producer through the information disseminator to the information user." In order to collaborate around a common process, a theme, or a specific activity/product, collaborators must know who their potential partners will be. Beyond that, it would be helpful to know what

particular lines of inquiry have been pursued, what progress has been made, what alternatives have been considered, what links already established. Recognizing the importance of person to *person information exchanges (Hood, AERA, 1989)*, it will nevertheless be important for collaboration participants to have access to information that is assembled systematically as well as accessible from a central source.

In this regard, OERI is currently attempting to expand and update its Project Management Information System (PMIS), a database that would house project summaries for all of its major programs and institutional awards. The goal of this system is to make available online a searchable database of current research projects, and eventually a similar database of effective programs and practices. Eventually, this database could be part of a telecommunications network that would tie together OERI organizational units and their institutional projects.

Establishing the Mechanisms

OERI ought to carefully examine mechanisms for embedding the concept of collaboration in the day-to-day existence of OERI program units areas and their institutional projects. Efforts to collaborate might be specified (and some now are) in OERI program regulations, solicitations, scopes of work, monitoring handbooks, and other internal policy documents.

Whatever mechanisms are established, it is essential that they clearly describe exactly what is expected of potential collaboration participants. The outcomes must be clear. It is also essential that the requirements resulting from these mechanisms are not so cumbersome or time-consuming that they interfere with the ultimate goal of collaboration. The process must be as simple and as streamlined as possible.

In addition, these mechanisms ought to suggest criteria that will assist participants identify and select activities around which collaboration will be most effective and most productive. For example --

- outcomes that can be accomplished better through collaboration than through projects working alone.
- outcomes that are related to clearly defined needs.
- outcomes that demonstrate direct and immediate benefit for all participants.

Recommendations

In light of the issues outlined in the sections above, the following recommendations are presented for consideration. They are neither exhaustive nor detailed. They are general recommendations designed to stimulate further discussion on the specifics of future OERI collaboration endeavors. Further, they are not listed in order of importance.

Recommendation 1: Seek widespread reaction to the specific recommendations contained in the Report of the the Working Group on OERI Collaboration. Responses should be sought from the regional laboratories, research and development centers, ERIC clearinghouses, and other OERI program areas.

Recommendation 2: Reconvene the OERI Working Group on Collaboration or establish a new group consisting of representatives of OERI collaboration participants. The primary responsibility of this group will be to develop an OERI policy on collaboration for implementation throughout OERI.

Recommendation 3: Include language about collaboration in the grant/contract solicitation announcements for the planned laboratory and center competitions and for future competitions of other appropriate programs.

- Approach -- establishment of a national collaboration governing board to consist of representatives of the winners of laboratory and center competitions. The purpose of such a board would be to design and implement a collaborative program amongst themselves which would draw together the strengths of each around a common problem/problems. The intent of this approach would be to provide discretion to the institutional projects themselves to oversee and administer collaboration initiatives.

- Approach -- development of solicitation announcements which specify that each of the recipients of laboratory, center, or clearinghouse awards will set aside a portion of its funds to be pooled together to establish a system wide collaboration program. This approach would bring the "team" concept to the management of collaborative activities.

- Approach -- development of a funds set-aside. These funds would then be competed for by eligible applicants to establish and maintain a collaborative network. This approach would centralize the management of collaborative activities by establishing a hub in one key institutional project. This approach would also provide an added incentive to both new recipients as well as continuing institutional projects because of the additional funds that might accrue to the winner.

Recommendation 4: Undertake some form of independent evaluation of the benefits of collaboration. The success of collaboration cannot be assumed. How will we know that it is working and having the intended results? This evaluation might be part of a comprehensive effort to assess the impact of the larger laboratory/center/clearinghouse system. *If an evaluation is not* possible, then some mechanism that provides a "report card" should be established.

(Since the very inception of the institutional projects -- laboratories, centers, and clearinghouses -- there has never been a comprehensive evaluation of this network. Yet, to date we have invested close to a billion dollars on this constellation of institutions.)

Recommendation 5: Enunciate a number of important national education issues around which collaborative activities can take root. This statement should come from the OERI Assistant Secretary.

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